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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000655

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: JUMBLATT SAYS S/E MITCHELL SHOULD FOCUS ON ISRAEL'S SETTLEMENTS

REF: BEIRUT 563

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Druze leader Walid Jumblatt, in a June 10 meeting with the Ambassador, advised that Special Envoy George Mitchell should secure a freeze on Israeli settlements in order that President Obama's peace efforts succeed. Asked about Lebanon's role in regional peace, he half-joked "We cannot afford peace here, we're tribes," but maintained that securing a freeze on Israeli settlements was the basic issue to pursue first for peace in the region to evolve. Jumblatt said that it would take one year to make a more substantial peace deal. He was skeptical on the value of contacts with Israel regarding Sheb'aa Farms and northern Ghajar, but added that the international community must deliver something on these issues. He believed "fixing up" the Ta'if Accord and the 1949 Lebanon-Israel Armistice would be starting points in reaching a future peace deal with Israel.

¶2. (C) Turning to Lebanon, Jumblatt remarked that Hizballah's uprising in Beirut on May 2008 cost Hizballah the parliamentary election, along with Hassan Nasrallah's arrogance and misplaced statements about May 7, 2008 having been a "glorious day." Jumblatt believed Hizballah would want to repeat the Doha Agreement's "blocking third." Stating that President Sleiman "lost" in the elections, Jumblatt nonetheless said he would advise the incoming majority-led government to work with Sleiman as he could provide some leverage to a minority bloc veto. Jumblatt said Saad Hariri would need good advisors and understand the lessons of history if he was to succeed as Lebanon's new Prime Minister. End summary.

SETTLEMENTS, SETTLEMENTS, SETTLEMENTS

¶3. (C) Druze leader Walid Jumblatt, in a June 10 meeting with the Ambassador, DCM and Poloff at his residence, advised that Special Envoy George Mitchell must secure a freeze on Israeli settlements for President Obama's peace efforts to succeed.

He maintained that securing a freeze on Israeli settlements was the basic issue to pursue for peace in the region to evolve. Jumblatt said after a settlement freeze was implemented, it would take one year to make "a more substantial" peace deal. He professed that after fifteen years of negotiations, the parties could not go back to "business as usual."

SHEB'AA & GHAJAR  
PART OF THE MIX

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¶4. (C) Jumblatt was negative on Lebanon being more forward-leaning with Israel to resolve the issues of Sheb'aa Farms and northern Ghajar. "We have enough divisions to work out in Lebanon without trying to do more with Israel now," he said. Instead Jumblatt stressed the need for the international community to "deliver something." He noted that while a separate peace deal in the region may be elusive, solving the issues of Sheb'aa and Ghajar could reduce regional tensions with Israel.

"WE'RE TRIBES HERE!"

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¶5. (C) Asked what S/E Mitchell should say to presumptive PM Saad Hariri and President Michel Sleiman regarding peace initiatives during S/E Mitchell's June 12 visit to Lebanon, Jumblatt blurted sardonically "We cannot afford peace here, we're tribes here." He assessed that "fixing up" the Ta'if Accord or using the 1949 Lebanese-Israeli Armistice as a

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starting point would be a "safe" approach to peace negotiations with Israel.

A TIRED JUMBLATT  
ASSESSES HIZBALLAH, AOUN

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¶6. Jumblatt looked tired and a bit down after the June 7 parliamentary elections in which his Progressive Socialist Party (PSP) lost five seats in an otherwise surprisingly strong victory for the March 14 coalition. (He had given up three or four of these before the election in order to help his March 14 allies in various districts and in a deal with opposition Druze leader Talal Arslan.) Jumblatt assessed that Hizballah had paid a price for its May 2008 uprising and for SYG Hassan Nasrallah's "misplaced" fiery speech last month, in which he called the May 2008 takeover a "glorious day" (reftel). Comparing May 2008 and election day, Jumblatt quipped that the "outcome was different without (the threat of) Hizballah's weapons."

¶7. (C) Jumblatt added that March 8 ally Michel Aoun would not change and nor would Hizballah. He believed both used time to their advantage and would be patient to get what they wanted from a new government. (Note: Aoun's bloc actually comes to the table with five more elected Free Patriotic Movement members than in 2005 -- 20 vs. 15 -- along with seven allies. End note.) Jumblatt believed Nasrallah would "cool down" if President Obama "delivered" on the Palestinian peace initiative, if Saudi-Syrian rapprochement continued, and U.S. if diplomatic engagement with Qatari moved forward. He advised that Hizballah would want to continue with the "blocking third" veto stipulated by the 2008 Doha Agreement, but cautioned that Lebanon could not go back to an agreement that was the result of an "invasion" if it wanted to move forward with political and economic reform.

PROSPECTIVE ON  
A NEW GOVERNMENT

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¶8. (C) Jumblatt said the strategy behind forming a new government was inherently different than that of elections

and "shocks would come" during the government formation process. He noted how "history repeats itself badly for the Lebanese" by letting "deal making" interfere with sound judgment in building a new government. He praised current Interior Minister Ziad Baroud as the type of person needed in Lebanon's new government. "With a proper system" new people would come, especially independents, he surmised. Jumblatt said there are many like Baroud who "only need a chance." Jumblatt however admitted to being part of the old style "feudal" political system that prevents new blood from entering into government.

9.(C) "Saad is acquiring experience," Jumblatt said of the March 14 leader and likely PM-designate. He will need to know the "lessons of Lebanon's history" if he is to succeed, Jumblatt added. Jumblatt admitted that on tough issues like electoral reform and economic reform, consensus would be needed. Stating that Sleiman had "lost" in the elections (a comment referring to some independent candidates' poor performance in Sleiman's home district), Jumblatt advised the new majority-led cabinet to work with Sleiman, as the President could provide some leverage to an opposition bloc in cabinet.

SISON